

RECREATION
REPORT

LIFT TO RUN SEPT 8-9 FOR MOUNTAIN BIKING AT ANTHONY LAKES RESORT

Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort will run the chairlift on Saturday, Sept. 8, and Sunday, Sept. 9 for mountain bikers who want to try the resort's new downhill Broadway Flow trail.

The lift will run from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. (tickets are \$10) on Sept. 8, and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sept. 9 (\$20 tickets).

Food and beverages will be available, with live music on Sunday afternoon. The Trailhead in Baker City will have bike demos on Sunday.

WILD WEST STYLE SHOOTING EVENT SATURDAY NEAR BAKER CITY

An Old West shooting competition is set for Saturday, Sept. 8 starting at 8:30 a.m. at the Powder River Sportsmen's Club's Virtue Flat range about six miles east of Baker City along Highway 86. Competitors will use single-action revolvers, lever-action rifles and shotguns. Entry fee is \$10 per person. Competitors are encouraged to wear cowboy attire. More information is available by calling Chuck Buchanan at 541-519-8550 or Dan McGuire at 541-212-5840.

COMMENTS SOUGHT ON MASTER PLAN FOR STATE PARKS IN WALLOWA COUNTY

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is accepting public comments on the draft master plan for state parks in Wallowa County. The comment period ends Oct. 20.

The plan addresses these parks: Minam State Recreation Area; Wallowa Lake State Park; Wallowa Lake Highway Forest Scenic Corridor.

The draft master plan is available online at wallowa.stateparksplan.com. Comments may be submitted online to the website above, or mailed to Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, attention Ian Matthews, 725 Summer St. N.E., Suite C, Salem, OR 97301.

There will also be two meetings about the plan, and public comments will be accepted at both meetings:

- Sept. 19, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Cook Memorial Library, 2006 Fourth St. in La Grande
- Sept. 20, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Joseph Community Center, 401 E. First St. in Joseph.

WALLOWA MOUNTAINS A REFUGE FOR THE SNOW-LOVING MOUNTAIN HEMLOCK TREE

A Haven for Hemlocks



THE LAY OF THE LAND

ETHAN SHAW

Editor's Note: This is the first installment in a new column by Ethan Shaw, a naturalist and freelance outdoors/nature writer who lives in Cove and spends as much time as possible in the backcountry. He hails from Wisconsin (where he earned a B.S. in Wildlife Ecology/Natural Resources and a graduate certificate in Geographic Information Systems at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) and has been an Oregon resident since 2006.

Northeast Oregon is a special place — but you already know that. In this column, I want to explore its physical landscape and where the mood of it comes from. That'll entail talking about mountains and plateaus and canyonlands; about basalt and dacite and granodiorite; about Rhinehart Gap and the Powder River Canyon; about ponderosa pines and mountain-mahoganies; about the way thunderheads pile up over the high country and wildfires hopscotch around the ridges and basins. We'll parse our way through regional place names and colloquial landscape terms, and in doing so weave a little human history into the natural. Mostly I'm going to focus on how the land looks, and why there's no other place quite like it: from the gutted tableland of the Northern Blues to the world's end country of Hells Canyon.

I could start things off with some sweeping overview of our physical geography (I was about to get carried away into just that), but instead I'm going to zoom in — way in — and talk about a particular kind of tree that does a pretty good job embodying the specialness of Northeast Oregon. It's a tree that's a dime a dozen in the subalpine forests and parkland of the “west side” — posing in countless postcard shots of Mount Hood and Mount Rainier — but which around these parts is a highly selective resident, one which tends to be overshadowed by more widespread players such as ponderosa or western larch. I'm referring to that shaggy denizen of the snow forests, the mountain hemlock.

In Eastern Oregon, mountain hemlocks are entirely confined to a particular swath of the Wallawas. This population grows farther south than any other east of the Cascade-Sierra crest; the nearest mountain hemlocks to these grow in the Bitterroots of North Idaho and Montana.

Our mountain hemlocks may make just a little outlier puddle of the species' geography, and hold a tiny domain compared to nearly all other conifers in this neck of the woods. But within the Wallawas themselves, the hemlocks cover a fair bit of ground on the windward flanks of the range. They grow as far east as the Lostine drainage and as far south as some of the headwater basins of the Upper Minam, but reach their local zenith along the long subalpine ridges and knobs of the northwestern Wallawas: that part of the mountains under the strongest influence of maritime airmasses cruising in via the great topographic gap of the Columbia River Gorge, and mantled with productive ash-rich soil. The western highlands between Cartwheel Ridge and Point Prominence, for example, support many stands; you can see a few hemlocks around the Moss Springs trailhead above Cove, and many more along the Rim Road back of Mount Fanny.

The maritime-moderated climate makes this northwestern Wallowa front wetter and milder than the range's southern and eastern sides; that, coupled with the high elevations, gives mountain hemlock its Blue Mountain Province foothold. This high-country conifer is adapted to the epically snowy heights of the Pacific Northwest and the High Sierra. It's not nearly so cold-hardy as the subalpine firs, Engelmann spruces, and lodgepole and whitebark pines that occupy vaster montane kingdoms in the Blue-Wallowa Mountains and Northern Rockies. Mountain hemlock requires a deep, long-lasting snowpack to insulate it from frigid temperatures (and supply summer moisture); its drooping form means it can carry a heavy snow load without breaking, and indeed such a swaddling can protect it against frost damage during cold snaps.

Few trees anywhere, in fact, are so snow-



A mature mountain hemlock tree in the Wallowa Mountains.

Photo by Ethan Schowalter-Hay

“The maritime-moderated climate makes this northwestern Wallowa front wetter and milder than the range's southern and eastern sides; that, coupled with the high elevations, gives mountain hemlock its Blue Mountain Province foothold.”

loving as the mountain hemlock, which prospers in some of the most blizzard-clobbered mountains in the world: the Coast Mountains of British Columbia, the Olympics, the Cascades. We're talking yearly snowfalls on the order of 40 or 50 feet — sometimes much more. In parts of its domain, mountain hemlock may endure (or, I guess, enjoy) snowpacks that last 10 months out of the year.

In the Inland Northwest, mountain hemlocks are confined to the snowiest and (relatively) mildest ranges, and that includes the Wallawas — where, like yews and sword ferns, the trees exist like emissaries of the Pacific Slope.

Mountain hemlocks in the northwestern Wallawas often grow intermixed with spruce, subalpine fir, lodgepole, and larch, standing out from these neighbors with their droopy tops and feathery, “weeping” boughs. But in certain topographic positions — those fostering the subalpine zone's heaviest and most persistent snows — hemlocks can form pure (or nearly pure) groves: along steep north-facing draws, coves and headwalls as well as leeward ridgebrows where a piled-up snowpack promotes what are sometimes called cornice or snowdrift forests.

Winter doesn't cede these hemlock havens easily. In late spring, you can cut across from a west-facing slope of hanging meadows in bloom, roaring with snowmelt rills, and drop into a dark hemlock wood on the “backside” of the ridge, within a headwater hole still hushed and snowbound.

“Snow” is one defining word for mountain hemlocks; I just used another — “dark.” An old logger's name for this tree is black hemlock, just about as appropriate as the “mountain” label. I haven't been in many woods as dark as a grove of mountain hemlocks: The dense little needles of interlocking boughs impressively block the sunlight, which in combination with the short growing season these snow-socked places experience means an extremely sparse, even non-existent, understory and groundcover. Shrubs and forbs struggle in this sort of deep gloom. The exposed duff and the hemlocks' blue-green foliage and gray, furrowed trunks only enhance the pall.

Just as you can pick out the downturned crowns of mountain hemlocks amid a mixed canopy on the

skyline, you can spot the darkness of a hemlock stand from afar when hiking high, comparatively sunny spruce/fir or lodgepole timber. Sometimes you'll step into such a grove and the thick carpet of grouse whortleberry characteristic of many of our subalpine communities stops abruptly, and all of a sudden you're crunching along in midday twilight with nothing but a thatch of hemlock cones underfoot. Like few other forest types in our region, entering a “black hemlock” wood is like crossing a hard — and kind of mysterious — threshold.

These wet, dark hemlock woods also tend to be well-loaded with tree lichens — horsehair, witches' hair, old-man's beard, wolf lichen — which only reinforce the naturally woolly look of the conifers. “Pistol-but” hemlocks with kinked trunk bases are common on severe slopes: the legacy of early years as saplings buried in downhill-sagging snowpacks and of general soil creep.

Given the scanty undergrowth, mountain-hemlock forests don't offer much in the way of browse, but elk and deer certainly seek out the shady cool in hot weather. And meanwhile sheltered hemlock basins are vital fountainheads for the watershed, given how long they hold snow: often well into midsummer.

Mountain hemlocks look delicate as seedlings and saplings, what with their limp, soft branches — though, again, this flexible form makes them super-tough dwellers of snowed-in backcountry. Big old hemlocks (like many conifers) lose some of the graceful symmetry of youth and grow into a ragged, wild profile: heavy and outspread arms, sometimes multi-stemmed crowns. The biggest recorded mountain hemlock, in the Sierra, claims a trunk better than 7 feet across. I've seen some very hefty hemlocks (if not quite that hefty) along the western rim of the Wallawas. These slow-growing trees inhabit stands that burn infrequently (though the wildfires that do eventually hit tend to be major, “stand-replacing” varieties), and may live more than eight centuries.

Along with sunny savannas of ponderosas, fiery bands of autumn larches, lush cathedrals of grand fir, and windswept, snag-studded whitebark parklands flanking the ridgetop crags, the dim, remote pockets of mountain hemlock add their own special tone to the Wallawas: a tone well out of proportion to the modest acreage they cover.

Steelhead limit at 1

For the second year in a row, daily bag limits for hatchery summer steelhead will be reduced to one fish per day for the Snake River and tributaries in the Grande Ronde and

Innaha River basins for the season that opened Saturday, Sept. 1.

The decision to initially reduce the bag limit corresponds with historically low Columbia River steelhead

counts observed in 2018, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. As of Aug. 29 just over 55,000 steelhead, which includes about 22,000 wild steelhead, had passed Bonneville

Dam. In total the steelhead run is about 25 percent of the most recent 10-year average. The bag limit reduction is intended to reduce fishing pressure on sensitive wild stocks of steelhead.

